United Nations E/2000/70

# Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
15 June 2000

Original: English

**Substantive session of 2000**
New York, 5 July-1 August 2000
Item 2 of the provisional agenda*
**Development and international cooperation in the twenty-first century: the role of information technology in the context of a knowledge-based global economy**

## Contribution of the Economic Commission for Africa to the theme for the high-level segment of the substantive session of 2000 of the Economic and Social Council

# Development and international cooperation in the twenty-first century: the role of information technology in the context of a knowledge-based economy

## A regional perspective

*Summary*

The President of the Economic and Social Council for the year 2000, in consultation with the Bureau, requested the regional commissions to hold regional intergovernmental or expert group meetings on information technology for development in their respective regions and to report on the outcome of these meetings to the high-level segment of the Council in order to provide a regional perspective on the theme for the high-level segment, entitled "Development and international cooperation in the twenty-first century: the role of information technology in the context of a knowledge-based economy".

All five regional commissions have submitted brief reports based on regional consultative meetings or on views solicited from their member States. The meetings of the ESCAP and ECLAC regions were hosted by the Governments of India and Brazil, respectively, on 20 and 21 June 2000. For its part, ECA held a high-level meeting, as the first African Development Forum, from 24 to 28 October 1999 under

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the theme "The challenge to Africa of globalization and the information age". ESCWA held its expert group meeting on 15 and 16 May 2000. ECE circulated a draft report to all its member States and comments received are integrated in the Commission's report to the Council.

# African Development Forum '99: the challenge to Africa of globalization and the information age

## Background

1. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) held a regional meeting with representatives of member States, as well as other major stakeholders in African development, on the role of information technology in accelerating African development. The meeting was convened as the first African Development Forum from 24 to 28 October 1999 under the theme "The challenge to Africa of globalization and the information age".

2. The issue of globalization and the information age was chosen for the inaugural African Development Forum because of the importance of defining African-owned and African-led strategies to engage with the global information economy.

3. The major goal of the Forum was to develop and support African initiatives fundamental to the shaping of the African information age. The Forum provided the first occasion for a broad range of African policy makers to come together to assess the opportunities, confront the challenges and develop a plan of action for Africa in the information age. It was also the culmination of more than three years of activities to build an African information society and the occasion to set future directions for the African Information Society Initiative (AISI).[1] The Forum was unique because, for the first time, it demonstrated how much was being done in Africa, by Africans, in harnessing information and communication technologies (ICTs) towards development. Much was already under way, and yet it was not well known even within Africa itself. Some of the most vibrant and innovative applications of ICTs for development occupied centre stage during the Forum.

## Attendance

4. The Forum was attended by some 950 participants from Governments, the private sector, civil society (including the academic sector and the media) and bilateral and multilateral organizations. Of all the participants that came to the Forum, 81 per cent were from the African region, 10 per cent from Europe, 6 per cent from North America and 2 per cent from elsewhere. Some 36 per cent were from the African public sector, 15 per cent from non-governmental organizations, 13 per cent from universities and research institutions, 15 per cent from the private sector and 15 per cent from development agencies (10 per cent listed their institution as "other").

## Opening

5. The Forum had two opening sessions, one on the evening of 24 October 1999 and another on the morning of 25 October. Speakers at the first session, which considered the broad issues of the African development challenge, included Prime Minister of Ethiopia Meles Zenawi, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations Louise Frechette, Secretary-General of the Organization of African Unity Salim Ahmed Salim, Vice-President of the African Development Bank Ahmed Bahgat and ECA Executive Secretary K. Y. Amoako.

6. The speakers set the scene by highlighting domestic private sector development, science and technology and good governance as key requirements for African progress. They emphasized the need for a new paradigm for the continent's development based on a vibrant domestic private sector, a strong State, cutting-edge policy analysis and good governance.

7. The opening plenary on 25 October featured keynote presentations underlining the development opportunities of the information age in Africa. Speakers included Louise Frechette, Noah Samara and K. Y. Amoako.

8. In her keynote address, the Deputy Secretary-General stated that knowledge was the new global asset, the very premise of progress. However, in harnessing ICTs for development we must beware of creating a digital divide between the information-rich and the information-poor. ICTs were not a luxury, but rather a tool for economic and social development. She identified the spread of ICTs as perhaps the most

[1] The African Information Society Initiative was adopted in May 1996 by resolution 812 (XXXI) of the ECA Conference of Ministers responsible for economic and social development planning. Since that time, it has provided the framework for the ECA programme on harnessing information for development.

important force spurring globalization along. Those ICTs were a tremendous force for integrating people and nations into the global economy. They could promote openness and transparency, leaving polluters and dictators fewer places to hide. The United Nations system, she said, would continue to do its part, particularly through the work of ECA and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The ADF provided a forum to bring partners together. The challenge was for Africa to craft its own links to the global information economy.

9. Noah Samara, Chief Executive Officer of WorldSpace Corporation, told participants that information affluence was the *sine qua non* to development. Over the past 15 years, he said, the industrialized world had shifted its focus from connecting people to connecting nodes of information which people could universally access, share and grow. Focus on convergence technologies had brought information affluence — unprecedented benefit and wealth resulting from networked media. To bring that affluence to Africa, he proposed that the Forum's participants should focus their collective energies on establishing 5 million Internet terminals in 5 million villages and neighbourhoods over the next five years.

10. The Executive Secretary of ECA spelled out his vision of an African renaissance spurred by information technology. Intelligent public policies, he stressed, were critical to making the shift from agriculture and manufacturing to information-based economies that employed innovation and technologically advanced applications. Such policies should be goal-focused, carefully monitored, long-term and intelligently led. They should address education, and, in particular, science and technology.

11. In the session on "Progress towards the African information age" the Director of the Development Information Services Division of ECA, set the scene for the work of the conference by briefing participants on AISI, stressing the importance of national information and communication infrastructure (NICI) policy processes and introducing the four themes of the Forum, which were:

(a) Globalization and the information economy;

(b) Strengthening Africa's information infrastructure;

(c) Information and communication technologies for improved governance;

(d) Democratizing access to the information society.

12. The programme proceeded for four days of plenary and breakout sessions, workshops, focus groups, feedback sessions, special panels, poster sessions, an information marketplace and an exhibit. (The full text of the report of the Forum is available at http://www.un.org/depts/eca/adf.)

13. A unique part of the conference, which contributed to the success of the conference and which is crucial to its follow-up, was the formation of focus groups of major stakeholders on the issue of information technology for African development. There were focus groups on gender, the private sector, academia, the African diaspora and youth. Formed prior to the Forum, these groups met in session during the Forum and provided regular feedback to the plenary.

14. Participants presented their recommendations and conclusions to the Forum in the context of what they called "The way forward to a people-centred African information society". Their point of departure was the basic right to communicate and to participate in society, which required equity of access to and use of ICTs. There was explicit recognition of the gravity of the digital divide, whereby many women, many young people, the disabled and many rural and marginal urban communities in Africa were distant from the advantages offered by ICTs.

## Importance of national policies

15. The participants saw the development and consolidation of NICI policies and plans as fundamental to the African information society. The national level provided the platform for making strategic choices on, for example, regulation, infrastructural priorities and service distribution. As the success of NICI efforts to date had been based on the inclusionary nature of the process, including as many stakeholders as possible, they stressed the need for its continuance, with efforts made to ensure private sector involvement.

16. While stressing the national level, strong emphasis was placed on the need to work for regional integration, as the enhancement of scale would do much to accelerate the building of an African information infrastructure. Cooperation at the

subregional and regional levels was also an essential part of the policy and regulatory frameworks. Additionally, ICTs were tools that could be used to facilitate regional economic integration.

## Forum recommendations

17. The principal recommendations made during the Forum, following its themes as well as its stakeholder groups, are outlined below.

### Globalization and the information economy

18. To join the information economy and to address barriers to e-commerce in Africa, participants felt that Africa must do the following:

(a) Combine economies of scale with competition;

(b) Improve local skills to cope with the brain drain problem;

(c) Encourage subregional cooperation;

(d) Establish a stable framework for investment;

(e) Develop the capacity to present and defend African positions in global forums, such as the World Trade Organization.

They felt that Governments needed to develop reliable statistical indicators to facilitate the process of planning the information economy and monitoring impact and performance. Governments needed clear information economy strategies in partnership with the private sector. They felt that the global multinational private sector could create partnerships with African small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs).

### Information and communication technologies for improved governance

19. Participants felt that ICTS for improved governance could support four areas especially: reducing poverty; meeting basic human needs; improving public administration; and enhancing democratization.

20. Their recommendations in that area were to do the following:

(a) Develop applications that fit priority areas for development, including job creation, agricultural information systems, human resource development and health;

(b) Establish good communication channels between decision makers and professionals;

(c) Design systems for capturing indigenous knowledge;

(d) Promote the sharing of information and resources among African countries through joint pilot projects, replications of best practices and the establishment of regional and subregional frameworks.

### Strengthening Africa's information infrastructure

21. Participants showed a commitment to follow-up actions related to policy and infrastructure development. They felt that policies and regulations should create an environment conducive to innovation, competition and investment. There was a need to strengthen autonomous regulatory bodies which actively involved all stakeholders and balanced diverse interests.

22. Specific recommendations included the following:

(a) Mobilizing local investment for ICTs and networks at all levels from global corporations to communities;

(b) Capacity-building for inclusive and effective policy formulation and regulation;

(c) Creation of new and expansion of existing African investment funds for rural and subregional development;

(d) Subregional cooperation on equipment selection, procurement, deployment and related areas;

(e) Enhanced African participation in Internet governance at the regional and international levels.

### Democratizing access to the information society

23. Participants felt that school networking and distance learning were essential to broadening access to the information society. They also recommended the following:

(a) Promotion and protection of indigenous knowledge through ICTs;

(b) Using intermediaries, such as information brokers, to broaden access;

(c) Integrating old and new information technologies;

(d) Facilitating cooperative, public access to ICTs.

24. The stakeholder groups stressed a number of areas for follow-up. The *youth group* recommended an on-line youth forum, the development of an African youth action plan through national youth forums, collaboration of African youth with youth elsewhere in the South and African content development, with emphasis on youth.

25. For ICTs to be an empowering tool for development, the *gender group* said that it was essential for women to participate effectively in ICT decision-making processes, including NICI development and that ICT applications, products and services needed to be designed to meet the specific needs of African women. They also wanted ICTs used to strengthen women's entrepreneurship and for women entrepreneurs to engage actively in the information economy. They recommended education and training in science and technology for young African women. ICTs could be used to enhance African women's capacity to speak out and support one another, they noted. The group also advocated the establishment of mechanisms to guarantee gender equity in ICT planning, projects and programmes as well as research on the impact of ICTs on women and their struggle for equality.

26. The *African diaspora group* was eager to have African Governments welcome their participation and support in meeting strategic goals. They felt that that could happen through the creation of an enabling environment and incentives for investment and trade. They voiced their intention to create a virtual forum of African experts in the diaspora to advise African decision makers and indicated that they would explore modalities of using diaspora expertise to support Africa's interests in global forums, such as the International Telecommunication Union, the World Trade Organization and the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers. They thought that they could be useful in mobilizing support for African ICT development efforts in Europe and North America.

27. The *academic group* recommended the development of institutional capacity for training policy makers, analysts and researchers on the role and the use of ICTs in development. At the regional level, they wanted to see the development of methodologies for impact assessment of national policies relating to ICTs and other policy issues, with a view to promoting transparency and accountability in governance and regional cooperation.

28. The *private sector group* felt that dialogue and debate within the African private sector and the global private sector was needed in order to enhance Africa's effectiveness in global forums. They advocated setting targets for creating employment in the information economy, focusing on intangible goods and services. To make that successful, the knowledge, education and training required for the information economy needed to be redefined. They felt that new instruments were needed to support the capital needs of the African private sector, including venture capital funds and the restructuring of available financing from the regional and international financial institutions.

29. In his concluding address, the Executive Secretary of ECA highlighted some of the main points of the Forum. He found the promise of ICT immense, with profound ramifications for education, commerce, bringing societies and nations closer together and relating Africa to the world. At the same time, it was not a panacea. African decision makers had to make careful policy choices that would provide the necessary human and financial investment. He stressed the importance of Africa producing content for the new technologies, related to health, education, e-commerce, culture, civil society, business and other topics. He emphasized the need for African leaders to understand the import of decisions being made outside of Africa and the importance of preparing regional positions to defend African interests in global decision arenas. He underscored how new forms of communication and information management could aid in democratizing society, with the widespread involvement of youth, women, the poor and rural people. To accomplish that, he stressed, required the involvement of the broadest possible spectrum of African society in the creation and management of ICT systems. He felt that the participants at the Forum showed a broad, informed and often passionate desire to make a real difference in Africa's development with the aid of ICT. He pledged the willingness of ECA to work together with them to hasten the day when the intelligent ICT community had more of a role in shaping society.

## Results of the Forum

30. Results of the evaluation of the Forum indicate that it succeeded in bringing the issue of information technology and development to the participants. Nearly 90 per cent of respondents to the evaluation said that the Forum had helped them to identify suitable policy options in that area for their countries. Additionally, 89.2 per cent of participants said that they felt the conference had achieved its objectives. Ninety-seven per cent of those who responded to the evaluation questionnaire said that they would undertake activities to follow up their participation in the conference.

31. A unique aspect of the synergies of the Forum on globalization and the information age in Africa was that it resulted in a number of initiatives independent of the formal programme that participants met on and agreed to follow up. Among these were Schoolnet Africa, Biz2BizNet, Beijing+5 Women's Networking Activities, NGOnet Africa Civil Society ICT Network Initiative, Telecentre Network, Alliance for African Business, African Digital Diaspora activities, Malawi ADF National Plan of Action, African Distance Learning Programme, Youth Network, and Gaia: Global Access Information Agency. Details of these initiatives are available in the report of the Forum, available at *http://www.un.org/Depts/eca/adf*

## Post-Forum Summit

32. ECA is following up the Forum with a post-Forum Summit to present to the highest levels of leadership the strategies that Forum participants considered to be among the most promising. To accelerate African development through the increased use of information and communication technologies, the Summit will examine an overall strategy that targets the key development sectors of education and youth, health and small business development along with the overall policy changes that are needed to underpin the transformation.

33. From the post-Forum Summit, ECA expects the following:

(a) Commitment from all partners (Governments, subregional organizations, the private sector and the development community) to work together to enhance the value to the African region as a whole of specific information society initiatives;

(b) Agreement from Governments to champion the African information society;

(c) Commitment from subregional economic organizations to build policy frameworks to enhance the impact of national information society policies;

(d) Increased public debate within countries on information society issues.

34. Once the commitment has been made, it is anticipated that much of the remainder of the strategy will fall into place as each African nation and subregion carves its own unique path towards the overall goals of an African information society.